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8. Education and Welfare

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Everywhere and always education has an economic aspect, for material welfare is one main concern of human life. The monastic schools in Burma aimed primarily at teaching the boys how to live as Burman Buddhists, but under their own kings they were also the chief means of advancement in Church and State. That was true also of education in medieval Europe. But in the modern world, when the application of rational criteria to social life reached the classroom, the economic aspect of education came into the foreground. In Europe this tendency has hitherto been kept within safe limits by the force of common social tradition but, in the plural society of tropical dependencies, there is no such tradition. It was because experience during the period of *laissez-faire* showed the need for some corrective that Curzon inaugurated the modern policy of providing a substitute for social tradition by teaching hygiene, thrift and morals.

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Hygiene, accordingly, is now often taught in schools. The teaching of hygiene can be enforced by attaching suitable conditions to the grant of funds, and teachers can be encouraged to obtain certificates as teachers of hygiene by the lure of better pay. But hygienic principles, as actually taught, are valid only for the examination hall. In Burma, one may find lessons on hygiene being given in a classroom thick with cobwebs. In western schools the teaching of hygiene survives only through compulsion, and in the vernacular schools it 'is a farce'.[1] Similarly in Malaya, as elsewhere, the teachers of hygiene sleep in unventilated rooms and neglect the most elementary precautions as to food and drink that they impress daily on their pupils.[2] In the teaching of hygiene 'success lies not in having the child learn facts about hygiene, but in having him learn hygienic habits'.[3] In this matter the Dutch, as usual, are very thorough. Each child is provided with a form in two parts. Every day on reaching school he must inspect the teeth, hands and nails of the child next him, and enter their condition on that child's form. The other part of the form, concerning his habits during the previous day in washing his hands, using the latrine, cleaning himself after defecation and so on he must fill in for himself. At the end of the month the forms are made over to a sanitary inspector, who visits sample

[1] *RPI*, 1927–32, p. 40; 1932–3, p. 17; 1932–7, p. 26.
[2] *RPI* (Malaya), 1938, p. 89.
[3] Hydrick, p. 59.

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homes to check the correctness of the entries. This system would seem unlikely to foster harmony in the classroom or the home, and one would hesitate to recommend it generally; and, except possibly in Java, the entries in the forms, whether made at home or in school, might be inaccurate and incomplete. But, even so, the Dutch recognize that it is useless to teach hygiene in school without raising the standard of hygiene among the parents.[1] In Burma, and probably elsewhere, men who have qualified as sanitary inspectors make a large part of their income by conniving at breaches of the health rules. Children may learn to pass examinations from text-books, but they learn to live from example and experience, and where the text-book teaches one thing and the environment another, it is the latter that prevails.

Again, the modern school is expected to inculcate thrift. In this matter also, in Malaya as elsewhere, teachers exhort the children to be thrifty while themselves notoriously in debt. Another agency for teaching thrift is the co-operative credit movement, but co-operative subordinates are no more solvent than subordinates in other services. The whole economic system of tropical dependencies favours and, one may even say, is based on, indebtedness among the cultivators and labourers; it is through advances to cultivators that exporters get cheap produce, and through advances to coolies that employers get cheap labour. One cannot cure this by teaching thrift in schools. Parents incur debt to provide a western education for their children, and men who have been taught thrift in school from the infant standard to the university do not learn to shun the moneylender. If the schools cannot teach cultivators to make more money, which they do want, they are unlikely to be more successful in teaching them western ideas of welfare which they do not want, and in great measure are precluded by the environment from adopting. Without fundamental changes in the economic environment, and in the climate of popular opinion, the idea that western ideas of material welfare can be taught in school is an illusion.

Very similar conditions apply to education as an instrument of moral welfare. Curzon deplored the lax discipline and low moral standards in the schools, and thought to provide a remedy by introducing moral primers and text-books of personal ethics, and by enforcing stricter supervision and control. We have noticed the sequel in Burma. When the new policy was first adopted, the moral standards

[1] Hydrick, pp. 13, 81.